

MOVEMENT

Words: Virginia Ngai
Images: William Furniss

*Deep underground on the southern part of Hong Kong Island are eight bunkers left over from World War II. Used as an ammunition and weapons storage depot during the War, it is now an exclusive wine cellar complete with a clubhouse, known as Crown Wine Cellars. KEE meets **Gregory Deéb**, co-founder of the venue and finds out how this unique project was born and why a former military structure is ideal for storing fine wines.*

Upon arriving at the Crown Wine Cellars (CWC) in Shouson Hill, one is struck by how homey and elegant it feels. The conservatory is filled with dinner tables set for the enjoyment of a night of fine wining and dining. Amidst a colour palette of burgundy, green and gold, the décor is elaborate and with three wine glasses at each place setting, it's obvious, even to the uninitiated, that this is a place to appreciate fine wine.

A narrow passageway leads into a library where more dining tables and comfortable leather chairs dominate the space. On one side of the room is an oak cabinet filled with Riedel crystal wine glasses of every shape and size and a selection of elegant decanters. The other side of the room offers a view into the premium wine cellars through two darkened sheets of glass.

Gregory Deéb is co-founder of Crown Wine Cellars and a former diplomat who was stationed in Hong Kong. Clearly proud of his establishment, Deéb enthusiastically describes its history. "This site was built by the British back in 1937 to serve as an ammunition and weapons storage depot in preparation for World War II. Originally known as the Central Ordinance (Munitions) Depot, this area was also known as



"Little Hong Kong." Deéb states that many Chinese have disagreed with him, saying that "Little Hong Kong" is in fact, Aberdeen, but what they didn't know and what scholars later theorised was that there were many Japanese spies in the community". In case soldiers were overheard while describing this location, it was given the codename of "Little Hong Kong."

Because of its proximity to Aberdeen, when people saw trucks going by Wong Nai Chung Gap, they just assumed they were going to Aberdeen and not to Shouson Hill where we are actually located," he says with a grin.

Another interesting point to note is that Hong Kong surrendered to the Japanese on Christmas Day in 1941 but this location surrendered on December 27th, making it the last place to fall under Japanese rule. In fact, the Central Ordinance (Munitions) Depot didn't surrender until they had negotiated terms with the Japanese. "The commander here during those two days told the Chinese troops to take off everything that identified them as soldiers and to infiltrate into the villages. As a result there were no Chinese Prisoners of War and the Japanese regarded the captured soldiers here with high regard. There's a special spirit in this place and we felt that in order to commemorate the soldiers, it was much better to keep it as

a living memorial," notes Deéb.

Retaining the bunkers as a living memorial was an important factor when Deéb was negotiating with the Hong Kong Government for the lease of this historical land. He argued that if the bunkers were made into a museum, people would only visit once and only people who were interested in history or from schools would benefit. By converting the area into a clubhouse where people can enjoy fine wines, visitors could stay for several hours at a time and dine whilst learning about the historical background of the site. In addition, due to the nature of the business, there would be a diverse group of people who visited, including private bankers, CEOs, and families with children.

The Government had met in 2000 to discuss ways of making Hong Kong a wine centre. Alongside that topic of discussion was the topic of historical sites. People had been clamouring to restore certain sites but the Government was in a difficult position, with welfare being its main focus. At that time, Deéb was acting Consul General for the South African Embassy and attended these discussions. His own thoughts gained momentum and he felt the urge to develop a business that fulfilled the basis of the discussions.

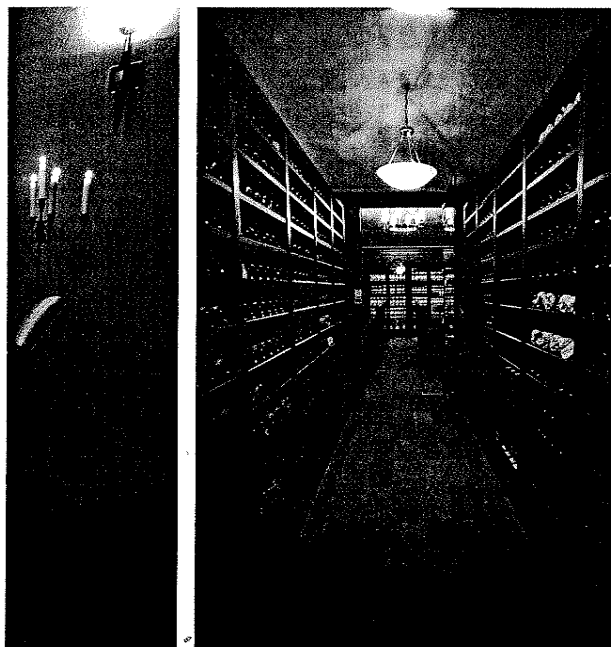
The idea sprung up that Hong Kong didn't really have any good wine cellars...

At the same time, his current business partner, Jim Thompson, had gone to South Africa and the idea of springing up Little Hong Kong didn't really have any good wine cellars. Deéb and Thompson had been friends but were both previously reluctant to discuss business together.

"In August 2003, Jim and I were dining together. We had consumed some wine and it was three in the morning. Both of us were aware that the other was interested in doing something with wine, but were too polite to say it outright. Finally Jim's wife, Sally, frustrated with the two of us sat us down and said "Look, both of you want to work in the wine business so sit down and discuss your ideas." Our conversation took off and the next morning Jim called me and asked if I was serious. And it just all took off from there," recalls Deéb with a smile.

The project has been a great leap of faith for Deéb. Having spent 15 years as a diplomat, he felt he didn't have much knowledge about being an entrepreneur. He is quick to emphasise that he had no relevant credentials and that he only had circumstantial knowledge about running businesses. But his passion took over and he made the transition from being a diplomat to negotiating with the Government for a contract and project management.

From the Government's point of view, it was the perfect arrangement. Crown Wine Cellars would respect the historical



site's integrity 100 percent and it would be highly accessible to people. The management would also be responsible for restoration and for educating people about the site's historical background. And at the end of the lease period, the Government would be able to take the site back. However, bureaucracy is never that simple and Deéb admits that there were times when he wanted to tear his hair out in frustration.

However, the project finally came together and in November 2003 the cellars became operational with the club being completed in March 2004. Crown Wine Cellars has six underground cellars of which four are for bonded storage. Because Hong Kong has an 80 percent tax duty on wines, it is ideal for those who collect and trade wine. Wine can be cellared for as long as required and then re-exported without paying duty. If the member should wish to open a bottle of bonded wine, Crown will negotiate with customs and release the wine within 48 hours (Crown Wine Cellars is an open bonded cellar which means that there isn't a customs official at the location).

The cellars employ the most advanced technology available. Each bottle of wine is individually tagged and entered into an online registration system and members can

access their personal inventory and arrange it to suit their needs. Since opening, Crown Wine Cellars has had zero breakage and loss with 100 percent secured ownership. The cellars also utilise a complex climate control. If the wine cellars are simply air conditioned, there are often air pockets in the space, but at Crown, the cellars bleed air out 24 hours a day,

ensuring that there are no air pockets. The moment the temperature drops 0.1 degrees, a heater switches on automatically to stabilise the climate. The humidity is kept at a constant 65 to 75 percent and due to the nature of the bunkers, the insulation of the cellars is immaculate.

The cellars have a two-door system that is electronically controlled and each person who goes in is tagged. There are guards on duty 24 hours with CCTV surveillance, motion

activated lighting, infra-red alarm systems and security codes at all entry points. Everything is controlled by a central computer system and the cellars work in pairs. Each cellar computer can operate two cellars so should one of them fail, the other can immediately take over. In addition, if the power fails, all the doors are immediately shut and totally sealed. "We are definitely market leaders when it comes to our wine cellars. We are the first professional wine storage facility and

clubhouse in Asia. I daresay that we have the best systems in place and can be compared to leading wine cellars all over the world and in fact, probably surpass them," states Deéb.

Crown Wine Cellars offers the largest wine selection in Hong Kong. Because it is a white flag wine business with no affiliations with any wine merchants, the wine on the consignment list comes from everywhere in the world without bias. In addition, Crown does not take a margin and offers wine to its members at retail price. To complement the wine, cheese is flown directly from France every two weeks and members are welcome to drop by anytime to sample what is on offer. Crown also offers both home and restaurant delivery of personal wines. Members can go online and specify how they wish the wine to be served and when the wine should be decanted. Wines that are stored in the cellar can be made available to members within three hours. With the type of service that CWC provides, wines are available at a click of the mouse or a phone call making wine cellars virtually at members' fingertips. ■

*The cellars
employ the
most advanced
technologies
available...*

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